

## Komagatamaru in Punjabi Literature



**Chaman Lal**

## **Literary Representations of Komagatamaru in Punjabi Literature\***

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It is more than one hundred years since Komagatamaru ship related incidents happened and 376 Indian passengers went through untold sufferings abroad and at home for many months! Some of them suffered long years of imprisonment, confinement in their villages, attachment of their properties and more at the hands of British colonial regime, yet when a public interest case was filed in Punjab and Haryana High Court at Chandigarh during last NDA regime, the Central Govt. Home ministry had refused to recognise Komagatamaru struggle as part of freedom struggle! It was recognised due to court decision and revised affidavit by changed Government later.

Every major socio/political/cultural event does get reflected in literature and other art forms of any society, country and language, so has been Komagatamaru tragedy reflected in Punjabi and English languages literatures. There could have been writings in Hindi and Urdu as well, which have not come to light yet, at least at broader level. However before taking a look at literary reflection, a summary background of the tragic event may not be out of place.

The first Punjabi/Indian people to put their feet on Canadian soil were army men at the fag end of nineteenth century. Later on in the first few years of twentieth century migration of Punjabi peasants to British Columbia in Canada and California State in USA started. Chinese, Japanese and other Asian migration was also taking place, but Indians were subjected to worst treatment and to stop them an Immigration act was passed in Canada, which made the entry of Indian immigrants almost impossible. The law was known as 'Continuous Journey' law, meaning that only those migrants will be allowed to de shore on Canadian soil, who will travel straight from the country of their origin and will have minimum of 200 hundred dollar amount with them. It was impossible for Indians to fulfil these conditions, as only one ship journeying from Calcutta to Vancouver was not selling tickets to Indians and only from Hong Kong they could sail straight without any change on the way. The law was passed in 1910, but was struck down in one case by Justice Hunter in year 1913 and some Indian passengers were allowed to de board the ship. In the age of communication reaching in many days, the news was a sigh of relief for hundreds of Indians waiting to travel to Canada. Even from Hong Kong or Japan, ships were not taking Indian passengers. Under such circumstances, a mature trader Baba Gurdit Singh was approached by many Indians to help and he decided to charter a full ship for this purpose. So a ship named 'Komagatamaru'-a Japanese name, was hired at 11 thousand dollars rent per month. Gurdit Singh associates started selling tickets and ship started its journey from Hong Kong on 4<sup>th</sup> April 1914 towards Vancouver. There were only 165 passengers in the beginning. Ship could accommodate up to five hundred passengers that was what Baba Gurdit Singh wished to. Ship was withheld at Hong Kong for few days to get instructions from Vancouver, but was released in absence of instructions. Ship on its way stopped at Yokohama, Moji and got more passengers, making it 376 in total-with 340 Sikhs, 24 Muslims and 12 Hindus on board. There were only few women on board. Gurdit Singh's motherless six year son Balwant was with him on ship. At Yokohama, the passengers were visited by Bhai Bhagwan Singh and Maulvi Barkatullah from Ghadar party. Bhai Bhagwan Singh was not allowed to enter Canada and he warned passengers that they may meet the same feat! However passengers were in offbeat mood. Indians in Vancouver city led by Hasan Rahim, Bhai Bhag Singh and Bhai Balwant Singh were preparing to receive them, but they were also apprehensive. There was one loophole left in immigration act and they wished to use that to get fellow Indians enter into Canada. They could have entered from an obscure port, whose name was not mentioned in the act. Hasan Rahim and a friend of his tried



desperately to locate the ship and turn it towards that place, however Komagatamaru captain Yamamoto may not be aware of that and he could not follow Indians searching them. So the ship first entered Victoria and then reached Vancouver shores on 23<sup>rd</sup> May 1914 morning. There it was encircled by immigration authorities led by Reid and they were not allowed to de board the ship. Lot many Indians were also waiting at the sea port to receive them, but none was allowed to speak or interact with passengers.

It was beginning of two month long ordeal for Indians in ship and in Vancouver city. Hasan Rahim and others formed a committee, so had ship passengers to make moves. Vancouver Indians hired a lawyer Edward Bird to represent the Komagatamaru ship passengers in court. Hasan Rahim was a socialist and advocate Bird was also from same thought stream. Passengers bound inside the ship faced tremendous hardships, the food items, water got exhausted in few days and there was constant struggle with Canadian authorities to feed the passengers. Sometimes Vancouver Indians, who had collected funds will send ration, sometime Canadian authorities were forced to send. Ship hiring rent payments were also creating big headache, since passengers were not in a position to pay to Gurdit Singh, so the ship hiring charter was transferred in Hasan Rahim and Bhag Singh's name and Rahim paid instalment with few days gap. It was taking long time as Reid was delaying the procedures purposely. He had immigration inspector and interpreter Hopkinson with him. Hopkinson was basically British Government subject from London, though born and brought up in India and now he was serving three governments-Canadian, British and US. He was a corrupt man also and was taking bribes. He had Indian agents-Bela Singh, Harnam Singh, Arjan Singh, Babu Singh etc. with him. Bela Singh, Babu Singh etc. were betrayers of Indians. Court proceedings were taking long time and ultimately Indians lost the case. In between boat like 'Sea Lion' had threatened the ship and passengers made it run away by attacking it with coal from inside ship and a brick was also thrown, which is now part of Museum of Vancouver with three interpretations on it!

After the case was lost, tussle was on getting rations for the journey from Canadian Government, it was long drawn out battle and ultimately Canadian government gave away and supplied the required rations to passengers. 'Rainbow'-an armed attacking Navy boat, was sent by Canadian authorities to encircle the ship and to fire at it, even to sink it. It was a war of nerves. Reid was precipitating the matters, from Ottawa-the seat of central Canadian government, Prime Minister sent another minister to deal with situation and he handled it by ignoring Reid line and after having filled with ration/water, the ship finally left Vancouver shores on 23<sup>rd</sup> July, exactly two months after it reached. Twenty passengers were allowed to land from the ship, who had been to Canada earlier and Dr. Raghunath Singh along with his wife and child was rewarded by allowing to land, for touting for Canadian authorities, against ship passengers.

But troubles of Komagatamaru passengers were not yet over. British government was keeping watch at its every step. On its return journey ship stopped at Yokohama again, where Baba Sohan Singh Bhakna loaded 200 hundred pistols (100 as per other accounts) and hundreds of copies of Ghadar paper to be taken to India for rebellion. Ship was not allowed to stop at Hong Kong, where many passengers wanted to get down, nor at Shanghai or Singapore, it was turned towards Calcutta, where passengers also wanted to go, not knowing the tragedy waiting there to happen!

Sensing trouble Baba Gurdit Singh, got the pistols and Ghadar paper thrown into the sea, yet ship was stopped at Kalpi 70 kilometres before Calcutta and thoroughly searched, nothing objectionable was found and when it reached Budge Budge ghat, 14 miles from Calcutta, passengers were rudely told to de board the ship and board the train on railway station to be straightway taken to Punjab. Large security forces led by Punjabi DSP Sukha Singh with

senior British colonial officers overseeing the operation had encircled them. Baba Gurdit Singh pleaded with officials to let them go to Calcutta to deposit copy of Guru Granth Sahib with respect and also allow passengers to settle matters at Calcutta. They took copy of Guru Granth Sahib on head and moved on foot towards Calcutta. They were forced to return to Budge Budge ghat and there they started performing evening religious ritual of ardas. One British official Eastwood kept on misbehaving, which provoked the passengers leading to unidentified firing, by which Eastwood and passengers got hurt, it led to indiscriminate firing by British police. It was dark of night by now. Only by morning, dead bodies were found, which included of passengers as well of bystanders-one Bengali and one Odiya person were among the twenty killed with large number injured. In the melee, many passengers were able to escape, including Baba Gurdit Singh, whose six year old son was taken into custody. Among twenty perhaps one was Sikh sepoy from British side. Two British officials-Eastwood and Lomax also died

Things did not quieten down in Vancouver either. Bela Singh murdered Bhai Bhag Singh and Bhai Watan Singh<sup>1</sup> in a Gurdwara few days after the ship left; one or two of Bela's colleagues were also murdered. Hopkinson tried to force Bhai Mewa Singh to give evidence in court in favour of Bela Singh to save him. Bhai Mewa Singh was fed up with these traitors and he assassinated Hopkinson on 21<sup>st</sup> October 1914, almost one month after ship left, for which he was executed on 11<sup>th</sup> January 1915. Hasan Rahim was shot earlier but escaped. Bela Singh was acquitted as government man and was sent back to India. In India he continued his nefarious deeds and got Bhai Balwant Singh hanged by his false statement in court. He was finally done to death in brutal way, chopping down all his body by three Ghadarites including Hari Singh Soond, in 1933. It was suffering on ship from April 1914 to September 1914-full six months and later 2 decades or more of continuation of hostilities among different characters and also the worst role played by British colonial government.

After Budge Budge Ghat firing and enquiry committee consisting of British touts and officials was constituted, including two royals-Rajas of Burdwan and Sardar Daljit Singh from Kapurthla state. As expected committee exonerated British officers and blamed Gurdit Singh and Komagatamaru passengers. Baba Gurdit Singh appeared on the scene after seven years of underground life, but he had been writing the story of sufferings of Komagatamaru passengers, which was partly published by Akali-Punjabi journal from Amritsar. Later he published it in book form in Punjabi, Urdu and English-Story of sufferings of Guru Nanak Jahaj passengers (Banned immediately)-as it was renamed from Komagatamaru. In English it was published as 'Voyage of Komagatamaru', the title later adopted by Hugh Johnston for his research publication in 1979. Baba Gurdit Singh rebutted enquiry committee findings. His other publication was 'Zulmi Katha'. These books have been reprinted recently.

From passengers suffering saga, some heroes and villains emerge. Indian heroes are villains for British colonialists. Since literary or artistic creation focuses upon dramatic personage of the events and Komagatamaru saga apart from its untold sufferings had lot of dramatic events. No wonder there have been more plays written on the event than other forms of creativity. In English there is play written long ago in 1976 by Sharon Pollock called-'The Komagatamaru Incident', while recently Tariq Malik has come out with fictional account in-'Chanting Denied Stories-The Komagatamaru Narrative. Mostly English writings have come from Canada. Two Punjabi plays have also come from Canada-Ajmer Rode's full length play-'Kamagatamaru' and Sadhu Binning and Sukhwant Hundal's joint short play-'Samundri Sheran Nal Takkar'. "Kamagatamaru' novel by Giani Kesar Singh should also be considered a Canadian writing on the subject, though most of Punjabi writings have been published in

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<sup>1</sup> Bhagat Singh mentioned Watan Singh in 'Chand' Fansi issue, November 1928, however Sohan Singh Pooni mentioned Badan Singh, Dr. Harcharn Singh in his play Kamagatamaru mentioned Bachan Singh



India. Another full length play 'Kamagatamaru', penned by Dr. Harcharn Singh was written and published in India. Mohinder Singh Sarna has a short story of the same title. There are few poems also available on the subject. Gadar di Goonj-collection of Punjabi poetry from San Francisco paper 'Gadar' or 'Hindustani Gadar' carries only one long poem from 'A dukhi musafir of Kamagatamaru', while Ghadar Party President for six years Giani Bhagwan Singh Pritam has at least three poems on the subject. In recent times, Sadhu Binning has penned a poem referring to Komagatamaru in his 1994 collection of poems-'Watno Dur Nahin'-No More Watno Dur'-a bilingual collection in Punjabi and English, which incidentally is dedicated to the memory of Komagatamaru passengers. There could be many more poems on this event.

Apart from literary writings, there have been other forms of creativity to reflect Komagatamaru passenger's sufferings. Jarnail Singh, Vancouver based painter has series of paintings, in India young artist Ashay Gangwar has done some short films, while Ali Kazmi's 'Continuous Journey', a well made documentary created a bit of ripples when it was first shown. Ali Kazmi, Toronto based scholar and film maker has the book of same title as well.

The earliest publications on Komagatamaru have been from 'Gadar' weekly published from 1<sup>st</sup> November 1913 in Urdu first and in Punjabi and many more languages later, from Gadar party headquarter San Francisco. It was renamed from April 1914 as 'Hindustan Gadar', after Lala Hardyal, its first editor and General Secretary of Gadar Party was forced to leave San Francisco for Germany due to US Government pressure. Poetry published in different publications related to Gadar party or Komagatamaru, including *Sudesh Sewak* and *Sansar* from Canada, were collected by Giani Kesar Singh Novelist from Canada, which was further edited by Dr. Kesar Singh Kesar from Panjab University Chandigarh. This collection was published under the title '*Gadar Lehar di Kavita*' (Poetry of the Gadar Movement) by Punjabi University Patiala in 1995. In this rich collection, one long poem called-'*Kama Gata maru Jahaj de Bebas Hindian di Pukar*' (The cry of helpless Indians of Komagatamaru ship) is included, whose author name is mentioned as '*Gadar da Sipahi Ik Dukhiya Musafir*' (A Gadar soldier-an agonised passenger).<sup>2</sup> This long poem was carried in three consecutive -6<sup>th</sup>, 13<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> October issues of '*Hindustan Gadar*' in Punjabi. This could even be the very first literary expression of the sufferings of the ship, as it began getting published from 6<sup>th</sup> October issue, just one week after the Komagatamaru ship landed at Budge Budge Ghat Calcutta. Though this collection has many more poems from the pens of 'passengers of Kamagatamaru', yet to reflect upon the sufferings of Komagatamaru passengers, this is the only poem. There are few proper names of poets in this collection. Poets are mentioned like-Dukhia Singh Kamagatamaru (Agonised Singh Komagatamaru) or *Ik Kamagaatamaru da dukhia musafir* (An agonised passenger of Komagatamaru).

This is long narrative poem in rhythmical meter; it looks like the poem was handed over to some Canadian Indian, before the Komagatamaru ship sailed back, from where it may have been sent by post or by hand to San Francisco for publication in 'Hindustan Gadar' weekly. The poem describes the struggle of Komagatamaru passengers and their fight with 'Sea Lions' boat attack upon them, but it does not mention the last and final attack of 'Rainbow' Navy boat and sailing back situation. Poem ends when the Komagatamaru crisis was not yet resolved and passengers had agreed to sail back, but the issue of ration was still not resolved.

Poem begins on a inspiring note, poet addresses to fellow Indians, but asks them not to get upset-'*Suno Hindio Zara dhyān deke, Gallan sundian sar ghabravna na/sada hal gariban da dard bharia, khol dasde han munh bhavna na*' (ਸੁਣੋ ਹਿੰਦੀਓ ਜ਼ਰਾ ਧਯਾਨ ਦੇਕੇ, ਗੱਲਾਂ ਸੁਣਦਿਆਂ ਸਾਰ ਘਬਰਾਵਨਾ ਨਾ /ਸਾਡਾ ਹਾਲ ਗਰੀਬਾਂ ਦਾ ਦਰਦ ਭਰਿਆ, ਖੋਲ ਦਸਦੇ ਹਾਂ ਮੂੰਹ ਭਵਾਵਨਾ ਨਾ) (Listen carefully O'

<sup>2</sup> Kesar Singh Novelkar (Compiler), Editor-Dr. Kesar Singh Kesar, *Gadar Lehar di Kavita*, Publication Bureau, Punjabi University Patiala, 1995 ed., pages 155-161

Indians, don't get upset after listening/the agonised condition of we poor, narrated explicitly, don't turn face)<sup>3</sup>

Poet is full of anger and resentment and expresses it in no uncertain terms. He addresses white rulers of Canada and India as 'Harami'(Bastards). He describes British rulers as hypocrites, who speak sweet, but are dishonest and exploiter and warns his readers not to get trapped in their traps. The poet narrates that how America stopped their entry then they thought of entering Canada. He keeps on repeating that British government was 'sweet talker', but 'covert attacker'-ਮਿਠਾ ਬੋਲਣਾ ਤੇ ਗੁੜ੍ਹਾ ਘਾਤ ਕਰਨਾ, ਭੈੜੀ ਲਭੀ ਅੰਗਰੇਜ਼ੀ ਸਰਕਾਰ ਸਾਨੂੰ<sup>4</sup>

Poet speaks highly of Gurdit Singh, who at that time came to help them by calling them to go to Canada. He chartered a boat at 70 thousand dollars (ਡਾਲੇ), but they were stopped from moving and detained Gurdit Singh. (It was at Hong Kong). They tried to scare us, but could not and had to leave us for moving on. Poet does not describe in detail the journey part till Victoria, except in two words that they saw the shore after a month after bad travelling (ਬੁਰੇ ਹਾਲ). They were stopped 2-3 miles before Victoria and were not allowed to meet Indians who came to see them on hired boat. They captured their boat and took them away. They (passengers) were detained without any crime. Second day they reached Vancouver, but again they were confined to waters 5-7 thousand yards away from the shore. Neither were they allowed to sail up to shore nor to meet Vancouver Indians. The rations, food, water got exhausted, and many times they had to go hungry. If there were no Indians there, they would have killed us hungry! They were not allowed to send letters, no justice, and no pity! The interpreter Hopkinson was coming there to challenge them. They were encircled by four hundred militia came with arms to throw us out! Passengers agreed to go back but with ration provided. They were attacked at midnight. Ultimately they fought back with just coal store inside the ship and made the armed militia run away. This is reference to clash with 'sea lions' boat, which was sent by Reid to attack the Komagatamaru ship. The longest description in poem is of this clash in dramatic form. After defeating sea lion boat, poet is full of just anger and more description is of that feeling. He describes the resolve of passengers to fight for freedom from British after return to the country. The couplet mentioned here reflects their mindset at that time of suffering and anger:

ਹੁਣ ਨਹੀਂ ਵਫ਼ਾਦਾਰੀ ਵਾਲੇ ਗੀਤ ਗੱਦੇ, ਚਲ ਦੇਸ਼ ਅੰਦਰ ਰੋਲਾ ਪਾ ਦਿਆਂਗੇ

ਕੰਨੋਂ ਫੜ ਕੇ ਜਦ ਗੋਰੇ ਬਾਹਰ ਕਢੇ, ਅਸੀਂ ਆਪਨਾ ਜ਼ੋਰ ਦਿਖਲਾ ਦਿਆਂਗੇ

ਕਤਲ ਆਮ ਕੀਤੀ ਜਦੋਂ ਪਾਜੀਆਂ ਦੀ, ਤਦੋਂ ਜ਼ੁਲਮ ਦਾ ਸਬਕ ਸਖਲਾ ਦਿਆਂਗੇ

ਜ਼ਬਾ ਕਟ ਫਰੰਗ ਦੀ ਸਟ ਦੇਈਏ, ਕਾਲਾ ਲੋਕ, ਬਸ ਕਹਿਣੋਂ ਹਟਾ ਦਿਆਂਗੇ

It means that we will not sing songs of loyalty now and will create disturbance after return to country. We will throw out the 'whites' by getting them from ear, we will show our power. When we massacre these mean people, to teach them lesson for atrocities. We will cut down the tongues of whites and stop them calling us 'kala lok'(Black people)!

<sup>3</sup> . *Gadar Lehar di Kavita*, page 155

<sup>4</sup> ---Same----page 156



The poem also refers to how British have created divisions among Hindus and Muslims and teach lesson to them fast. Poet tells that Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs together will eradicate the dishonest from the country (ਮੁਸਲਮਾਨ, ਹਿੰਦੂ, ਸਿੱਖ ਰਲ ਸਾਰੇ, ਬੇਈਮਾਨ ਦਾ ਤੁਖਮ ਮਿਟਾ ਦਿਆਂਗੇ!)

Rhythmical metric poems are meant to be sung among gatherings of people in large numbers and this poem is also for that purpose, it is like a war cry. More than artistry, poem reflects the genuine anger and agony of the Komagatamaru sufferers.

Dr. Bhai Bhagwan Singh 'Pritam', the second President of Gadar party from 1914 to 1920, was the best considered poet of all Ghadarite activists and poets. As poet he used 'Pritam' as his poetic title. As per Hira Singh Dard and Dr. Kesar Singh, Ghadar party or movement had produced three great poets-Bhai Bhagwan Singh 'Pritam', Harnam Singh Tundilat and Munsha Singh Dukhi, though many more including known revolutionary heroes like Kartar Singh Sarabha and Teja Singh Sutantar also wrote poetry in that period. *Gadar Lehar di kavita* includes many poems of Bhai Bhagwan Singh 'Pritam', whose independent collection of poetry-'*Gadri Goonjan*' was edited and published by his grandson Surinderpal Singh in 2002. Kirpal Singh Kasel in introduction to the collection has mentioned that this collection includes only the poems of early period-of Gadar movement, his later poetry is not included in this. Bhai Bhagwan Singh Giani, who had done PhD later in 1928 from Berkeley University, was a prolific writer and had many other books in English and Punjabi in prose,.

Out of 42 poems collected in this collection, there are few poems relating to Komagata Maru ship sufferers. These poems are-*Pyare Watan Wasian nun Sandesha-Kama gata de Hindian Walon*(Message to dear countrymen from Indians of Kama Gata), *Baint Hindi Shahidan da Sandesha*(Rhyme-Message of Indian martyrs) and the last '*Gadar di Mahima*'(Glory of Gadar)<sup>5</sup>.

The first poem<sup>6</sup> written on 28<sup>th</sup> February 1915 depicts the sufferings of Komagata Maru passengers and their sacrifices, but with a message of valour. Written in beautiful rhythmic style, poem is full of similes and other poetical metaphors. Poem has a sad expression on Indians unconcern at patriotic sacrifices of Koma Gata Maru like incidents. He says-ਹਿੰਦੀ ਰਹੇ ਬੇਖਬਰ ਨਾ ਸਾਰ ਲੀਤੀ/ਹੈਸਾਂ ਫੁਲ ਗੁਲਾਬ ਕੁਮਲਾ ਗਏ ਹਾਂ (Indians remained unconcerned, did not care/(we) were roses, have got withered)

Bhai Bhagwan Singh Pritam's other two poems are not directly referred to Komagata Maru, but are well known touching poems on Gadar movement, which included Komagata Maru ship passenger's role also. The poem-*Hindi Shahidan da sandesha* written on 29<sup>th</sup> March 1916, is very touching poem, it begins-'ਹਿੰਦੁਸਤਾਨੀਓਂ ਰਖਣਾ ਯਾਦ ਸਾਨੂੰ, /ਕਿਤੇ ਦਿਲਾਂ ਤੋਂ ਨਹੀਂ ਭੁਲਾ ਦੇਣਾ' (O' Indians Remember Us/Forget us not), ਕਦੇ ਦੇਖ ਸ਼ਹੀਦਾਂ ਦੀ ਕਬਰ ਵਲੋਂ/ਦੇ ਦੇ ਫੁਲ ਪ੍ਰੇਮ ਦੇ ਪਾ ਦੇਣਾ (Looking at the tomb of martyrs occasionally /do offer few flowers of love).

Many of Ghadarite poets wrote poetry in Hindustani language, but used Gurmukhi script. Bhai Bhagwan Singh also wrote such poems, one of which is quite popular-*Gadar di mahima*- This is literally an Urdu poem, written in Gurmukhi script on 25<sup>th</sup> July 1917-ਐ ਗਦਰ ਤੂੰ ਨੇ ਹਮਕੋ ਅਪਨਾ ਬਨਾ ਕੇ ਛੋੜਾ/ਬਿਛੜੇ ਬੇ ਭਾਈ ਭਾਈ ਸਬਕੇ ਮਿਲਾ ਕੇ ਛੋੜਾ /.....'ਜੀਤੇ ਹੈਂ ਵੇਹ ਹਮੇਸ਼ਾ ਮਰਤੇ ਜੇ ਕੋਮ ਖਾਤਿਰ /ਹਰ ਦਿਲ ਮੇਂ ਡੰਕਾ ਤੂੰ ਨੇ ਅਪਨਾ ਬਨਾ ਕੇ ਛੋੜਾ । Substance of this poem is-O' Gadar you made us your own/You

<sup>5</sup> Dr. Bhagwan Singh Gyani 'Pritam', '*Gadri Goonjan*'(ਗਦਰੀ ਗੂੰਜਾਂ ), 2002, Lahore Book shop, Ludhiana

<sup>6</sup> *Gadri Goonjan*, pages 53-58

made all the lost brothers join together/.....Those who die for nation, they live forever/You toll your bells in every heart

Bhai Bhagwan Singh Pritam's poetry is surely a very touching and mature poetry of Gadar movement.

ਸਾਧੂ Binning's 29 poems bilingual collection of 1994-*No More Watno Dur-ਵਤਨੋਂ ਦੂਰ ਨਹੀਂ* is dedicated 'In Memory of The Passengers of Komagata Maru', however it has only one poem directly related to Komagata Maru passengers-Welcome in English and ਜੀਆਇਆਂ ਨੂੰ in Punjabi . English translation of the poems has been done by poet himself. It is a small poem, can be quoted in full in English:

*I often speak/to the grass/the trees/and the river/they never tell me/I wasn't welcome/*

*I have heard the wind/chatting with leaves/not once a note of hatred/the rain and the*

*Snow/touch me on my shoulders/as many others friends do/the birds come every*

*Morning/and sing outside my window/welcoming me into a new place/a new day/why*

*weren't they consulted/when the decision was made/to send my Komagata Maru away*

This is a beautiful poem, linking human life to nature. While for nature all human beings are the same, part of broader nature. It is only human society, which destroys principles of nature and act rather unnaturally when it discriminate between human beings on the basis of race, colour or power! The poem is like conscience picker for present generation of Canadians and to humanise them.

In fictional representation of Komagata Maru, there are two texts available. Mohinder Singh Sarna has a short story and Giani Kesar Singh novelist, a novel; both have same title of their texts-'Kamagata Maru'. Giani Kesar Singh's 208 page novel was published in 1993, while the publication time of Sarna's story is not known, which is part of his collection of short stories.

Sarna's story is a human situation story, when a couple comes to Railway station to see of a minister. The man may be an official, but his wife is not so much concerned about minister. An eighty year old man asks them whether they have seen a young girl 'Banto', man is little annoyed, as he wants to pay attention to minister's see off. He tries to get rid of the old man, but his wife listens to him with compassion. And the old man brings out the story of getting lost at Budge Budge Ghat in 1914, when police started firing on passengers, in the melee his wife Banto, who was 22 years at that time, gets lost and since then he is searching for her. He imagines her of 22 years, as he had not seen her ageing. After listening to his story, woman shows some compassion to him, as he returns from ticket window, not getting ticket due to shortage of some money. He wants to go to Calcutta to continue his unending search of decades. Minister has been seen off, as the official can see from little far, but now he is also touched by old man's story. The story in narration brings out the facts of Budge Budge Ghat incident as well. Though written as human interest story, it is more of contoured story and not spontaneous. At level of reality also, there were very few women among Komagata Maru passengers.

Giani Kesar Singh's novel 'Kamagata Maru' was published for the first time in 1993 from Patiala. Kirpal Singh Kasel, a friend of novelist and chronicler of Gadar documents introduced the novel and novelist. Divided into 63 chapters, novel begins with mutual dialogue of some



Ghadarites characters. In a meeting of Indian Canadians, Bhai Bhag Singh and Bhai Balwant Singh are engaged in dialogue with Udham Singh Kasel and Bhai Mewa Singh also present.

Novel and drama can bring out the heroes and villains of a movement/event in a live form, so the novel and three plays on the theme do bring out the characters in contrast.

Hasan Rahim, whose real name was Chhagan Verma, a Gujarati Hindu trader had adopted Hasan Rahim name, which continued till his death. He was socialist and the leader of Indian community in Vancouver, along with Bhai Bhag Singh, Bhai Balwant Singh, Bhai Mewa Singh, Sohan Lal, Mitt Singh Pandori, Harnam Singh Gujjarwal, Dr. Sunder Singh, Udham Singh Kasel, Mohammad Akbar, Raja Singh Wading and more. From Kamagata Maru Ship passengers-Baba Gurdit Singh emerges as supreme hero, while his secretary Daljit Singh, Amir Mohamad Khan, Amar Singh Nihang and few members of shore committee also figure among heroes, while Dr. Raghunath Singh, Bhan Singh and one or two more were among villains, who played touts to Canadian authorities.

One of the Komagatamaru passengers, who emerged a tall hero later, however remains missing in literature. He is Baba Gurmukh Singh Lalton, who was also convicted in Punjab, after being arrested at Budge Budge ghat. Later on he had jumped with handcuffs on, from custody and remained underground for years together and contributed towards building Communist movement in Punjab and elsewhere. He had influenced Chittagong revolutionaries in Andaman's to join Communist party during their co imprisonment there. And he is the one who built Ghadarite memorial hall in Jalandhar later after 1947.s

On the villain side Reid, Stevens and Hopkinson from Canadian government and Bela Singh, Babu Singh, Harnam Singh and Arjan Singh among Indian Canadians, who were touting for Hopkinson, were prominent villains from Indian angle. Bela Singh was perhaps the worst of all and got the worst of death, though too late.

Novel depicts the arrival of Komagata Maru ship on early morning of 23<sup>rd</sup> May 1914 and Reid and Hopkinson encircle the ship through Canadian force. During its journey towards Vancouver Gurdit Singh tried to have common kitchen/cooking for all three communities-Sikhs, Muslims and Hindus, but is not successful, though during their ordeal at Vancouver shores, it happens spontaneously. Indian community in Vancouver hires Edward Bird as their lawyer, who tries to contact passengers, but is not allowed. Health officer declares 90 persons as suffering from Trachoma. Conservative member Parliament Stevens is racist and is in favour of 'Canada for Whites'. Reid is acting mostly on his behalf. Hopkinson known for his bribery habits is British servant in India and here in Canada is appointed as interpreter and immigration inspector. He tries to make a deal with Gurdit Singh for 2000 dollar bribe, one thousand in advance and another later after release of ship. Gurdit Singh is ready for deal, but Hopkinson wants his pledge before Guru granth sahib to keep the secret, which Gurdit Singh refuses.

On 31<sup>st</sup> May 2014 Indian community holds its meeting under the chairmanship of Hasan Rahim in dominion hall, in which nearly 700 Indians participate. 20 thousand dollars are collected as fund, 11 thousand dollar hiring charges of ship are paid, which were due before 11<sup>th</sup> June. (Date of this meeting and amount of collected fund is given differently in some other historical and literary texts). Charter of the ship is transferred to Hasan Rahim and Bhag Singh. In Ottawa, Canadian capital, Prime Minister wants to resolve the crisis without resorting to violence, but Stevens and Reid precipitate the matters at every step due to their racist attitude. The struggle for ration begins, as the ration on ship is exhausted in so many days detention at the shore. Passengers were tried to be armed through Bhai Mewa Singh with arms sent by Taraknath Das, but he was caught and plan misfired. Shore committee had spent sixty thousand dollars on food/rations, then the sea lions fireboat encircling the passengers

and trying to force them to get out, created another crisis. Sea lions attack was defeated by sheer will of passengers through coal attack and cutting down the rope. One brick was also thrown by passengers (which now is part of Vancouver museum). Novelist has almost depicted day to day account of ship condition till it was made to leave on 23<sup>rd</sup> July after tension created by Rainbow Navy boat. Novelist has described the return journey also in detail. Ship reaches Yokohama on 6<sup>th</sup> August, where Baba Bhakna gives pistols and ghadar papers, delivers speech also. Here impressed by patriotic sentiments two Sindhi brothers-Jawahar Mal and Narain Mal also get into ship. Ship reaches Kobe on 21<sup>st</sup> August, where British colonial office is pressured into supplying ration for journey. Some passengers got down at Yokohama to go towards Shanghai. Ship stayed at Kobe for 12 days and left on 3<sup>rd</sup> September, reaching Singapore on 16<sup>th</sup> September. On 19<sup>th</sup> September it left Singapore, pistols and ghadar papers thrown into sea here. On 26<sup>th</sup> September ship reached Kalpi, here ship was thoroughly searched for two days. D Petrie intelligence officer, other British officials-James Donald, Hoshiarpur DC Humphrey was also present there. Maximum search was made of Gurdit Singh's cabin, all papers and money was confiscated. 29<sup>th</sup> September morning ship moved towards Calcutta. It reached Budge Budge Ghat by noon, 14 miles from Calcutta. Here the conflict of forcing passengers to board the direct train to Punjab ha. Only 62 passengers out of nearly 300 agreed to board train, all others resisted, which led to clashes resulting in 20 deaths, 48 wounded including Balwant Singh were arrested. Gurdit Singh after going through lot of hardships took train to Jagananth Puri. Surendernath Banerjee in Bengali paper spoke against British cruelties, after which sham enquiry was set up. Poohlo Ram and Bhan Singh gave statement against Gurdit Singh. While 193 passengers including six year Balwant Singh were imprisoned in Kalighat jail. Later 92 including Balwant Singh were sent to Punjab and 87 were confined to their homes. 27 passengers including Gurdit Singh and his secretary Daljit Singh went missing. Amir Mohamad Khan, Amar Singh Nihang etc. 31 were imprisoned without trial. 3200 Indians returned to India, who were confined to their villages for many years.

On the other side at Vancouver Bela Singh murdered Bhai Bhag Singh and Watan Singh inside Gurdwara. On 21<sup>st</sup> October 1914, Bhai Mewa Singh assassinated Hopkinson inside the court. Mewa Singh was hanged on 11<sup>th</sup> January 1915. Bela Singh was acquitted and later sent back to Punjab, where he continued his villains activities, including getting Bhai Balwant Singh executed. It was on 9<sup>th</sup> December 1933 that Bela Singh was chopped to pieces by Jathedar Ishar Singh, Inder Singh Murari and Hari Singh Soond<sup>789</sup>.

Baba Gurdit Singh story is also narrated, he moves places to places and keeps in touch with national leaders, meets Gandhi 2-3 times, without getting ear. Chaudhary Rambhaji from Punjab Congress listens to him and he surrenders on 15<sup>th</sup> November 1921 on Guru Nanak birthday at Nankana Sahib in presence of thousands of people after addressing them in Gurdwara earlier.

Gian Kesar Singh is historian of Ghadar party and his novel in a way recreates history-it is mix of fact and fiction-more of fact and less of fiction. It is a kind of narrative history, by which Kamagata Maru novel has been written by the author.

Out of three plays written Komagata Maru, written in Punjabi, first was a short play of 12 pages with the title-Samundri Sher nal Takkar(Clash with Sea Lion).<sup>10</sup> It was penned by Sadhu

<sup>7</sup> Sadhu Binning, 'No More Watno Dur', 1994, TSAR Toronto, pages 10-11

<sup>8</sup> Giani Kesar Singh, 'Kamagata Maru'(Punjabi novel), 1993, Punjabi Publication Patiala

<sup>9</sup> .Sohan Singh Pooni, Canada de Gadri Yodhe(Punjabi) (Gadri fighters of Canada), 2009, Singh Brothers, Amritsar, pages 160-161

<sup>10</sup> Sadhu and Sukhwant Hundal, Samundri Sher Naal Takkar(Punjabi)(Fight with Sea Lion), 'Watan' Vancouver, special 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary Komagata Maru issue July-September,1989, pages 33-44



and Sukhwant Hundal in 1977s, who came out with a special issue of their 1st issue of 'Watan', rechristened from earlier 'Watno Dur', a Punjabi journal from Vancouver in 1989. The special issue was focused on Komagata Maru. The play has a narrator-sutrdhar, he gives the background information. He describes the situation that it is seven weeks now since Komagata Maru is standing here. Immigration officials are hell bent on deporting it back and local newspapers are supporting Canadian government, while Indian paper Hindustanee, edited by Hasan Rahim is supporting Komagata Maru passengers. There is reference to 21<sup>st</sup> June 1914 meeting of Indians in Dominion hall, which was addressed by Canadian socialist leader Fitzgerald, advocate Bird and Sohan Lal. Next day the racial whites held the meeting in same hall, where Tory MP Stevens and Mayor Baxter made racial speeches against Indians. Malcolm Reid is holding meeting with ship captain Yamamoto to force him to move the ship, he is reluctant due to resistance of passengers, and he forces him to ask for police help, which he obliges later. Now Canadian officials starts preparedness for fight of sea lions with Komagata Maru! The news is kept secret, so that ship passengers do not get ready to face it. At midnight sea lions attacks ship, but its deck is fifteen feet below than Komagata Maru. It throws a rope towards ship, cut down by passengers, who also rain the coals on sea lion, it gets destabilised and returns, passengers are happy.

However two days later Canadian navy ship Rainbow came with open guns. On 23<sup>rd</sup> July 1914, Komagata Maru ship leaves Vancouver.

Play depicts the social conditions of Vancouver of those few days of 1914 with dramatic effect.

The next significant play on the event is having the title-'Kamagata Maru'<sup>11</sup>. Written by Ajmer Rode, again a Vancouver resident was first time staged in 1979, before being published in 1983. This play has been reproduced in the centenary year of Komagata Maru many times last year. Playwright and poet Ajmer Rode himself directed the first production, in which his wife poet Surjit Kalsey and theatre activist actor sister Amrit Mann also acted. Though a full length play there is no act or scene division in the play and it is played in continuation, though in his detailed stage instructions about the play, Rode has given freedom to theatre group to have interval anywhere, if a theatre group so wishes.

Playwright has created an imaginary young girl character, who attends to an old man visiting Vancouver and is searching for an old Gurdwara site. When young girl tells the old man that Gurdwara was demolished and now she lives in the flats constructed over that land, the old man is saddened and he tells the girl that he is passenger of that ship and that Gurdwara had played a great role during those days. Young girl, who had heard about Komagata Maru, but knows nothing, becomes keen to know the story, so that they go to the sea shore where Komagata Maru was detained for two months and listens to old man recreate the story in background. Incidentally Hugh Johnston in his book Voyage of Komagata Maru, has referred to one passenger Kartar Singh visiting Canada after many years in his old age, whom he had interviewed also. Ajmer Rode has also created another imaginary character Jean, a Canadian girl working in Hopkinson's office, despite being a white Canadian, she sympathises with Komagata Maru passengers. Playwright has narrated almost all factual incidents of those days, but has created dramatic effect in each of his chosen events. Meetings held of Indians are also recreated, and the incidents are also recreated as these happened. Fight between Sea Lion and Komagata Maru passengers clash has been recreated with forceful dramatic effect. The story or rumour of burning down of Vancouver city in case the demands of Komagata Maru passenger's demands for ration etc. were not accepted, has also been used in the play with dramatic effect. Gurdit Singh and his secretary Daljit Singh

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<sup>11</sup> Ajmer Rode, Kamagata Maru(Punjabi Play), 2013, 3<sup>rd</sup> edition, Third Eye Publication London Ontario

dialogues are part of play. Another dramatic effect is of Mewa Singh shooting down Hopkinson in court complex, which is climax and end of the play as well.

Ajmer Rode has conceived and written this play with careful attention to historical facts and recreated those facts with artistic maturity. By far this is the best play or literary representation of Komagata Maru tragedy in Punjabi literature.

Third play in this series, with the same title of 'Kamagata Maru',<sup>12</sup> is of Dr. Harcharn Singh, who visited Canada in 1981 and with the inspiration from Giani Kesar Singh and Tara Singh Hayer, editor of a leading Punjabi paper in Canada, he conceived and wrote this play. The play was staged before its first publication in 1985 from Chandigarh. His son and theatre activist Harbux Latta directed it. Playwright conceived four metropolises in the play-Hong Kong, Yokohama, Vancouver and Calcutta for staging the play. First production of the play in Chandigarh was sponsored by H S Bhatti and playwright has given elaborate stage directions and remained part of background team for staging the play.

Play has eleven scenes. The play begins in the present time at Vancouver in another imaginative character of a young girl, who is hysterical after seeing a nightmare. It is Nirmal, who had been thinking about Komagata Maru tragedy before going to sleep and she sees Mewa Singh after shooting Hopkinson, shouting 'Arrest Me!' Her parents call the doctor, who tells them it is hallucination, due to listening speeches and poems/songs earlier in Gurdwara on Komagata Maru day. And in background Komagata Maru tragedy begins from April 1914, where passengers are waiting at sea shore for the departure of Komagata Maru ship. They are Harnam, Karta and Peerbux-Sikh, Hindu and Muslim! They beat up a man who was speaking against Baba Gurdit Singh and the story of Guru Nanak Steamship Company established by Gurdit Singh for taking up this journey unfolds. Incidentally Komagata Maru ship was renamed 'Guru Nanak Jahaj' by Gurdit Singh and his own narration of whole story is given title-Shri Guru Nanak Jahaj de Musafir di dard bhari kahani'(The anguished story of passengers of Guru Nanak ship).

The next scene is at Yokohama sea shore. Passengers are visiting market there and are stunned to see open prostitution, when some of them object; Japanese taunt them that 'there is no bigger debauchery than slavery'! Some passengers did go to women; it was recorded in some history books later, including of Hugh Johnston. At Yokohama, Giani Bhagwan Singh and Maulvi Barkatullah from Gadar party visit them and they warn them about Hopkinson.

Third scene is at early morning of 23<sup>rd</sup> May and singing of war songs on Dhadh instrument. Hopkinson is described as two mouthed snake and poisonous too! In next few scenes at Vancouver shore, the known events are recreated. Some new scenes are added like some passengers rebelling against Gurdit Singh by the machinations of Bela Singh. A child's dead body, who died due to thirst is also shown. But Gurdit Singh's truthful response wins back the rebelling passengers. Baba Gurdit Singh is shown opposing the reported move of Vancouver Indians to put the city to fire if anything happened to Komagata Maru passengers. The ship returns after getting full ration for the journey. Another scene is created at Yokohama shore, where Baba Sohan Singh Bhakna puts arms in the ship, Kartar Singh Sarabha is also shown at Yokohama in Dr. Harcharn Singh play.

10<sup>th</sup> and eleventh scenes are at Budge Budge Ghat Calcutta, where the searches, firing took place. The date mentioned in print version of play is 9<sup>th</sup> September, which could be a printing error also as it was 29<sup>th</sup> September. The play concludes with the execution news of Bhai Mewa Singh in Vancouver. Play returns to present with Nirmal thinking of going back to Punjab.

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<sup>12</sup> Dr. Harcharn Singh, Kamagata Maru(Punjabi Play), 1985, Raghbir Rachna Prakshan, Chandigarh.



This play has been stuffed with more events than any other play. The play is consciously conceived. Despite keeping all three major communities-Sikhs, Hindus and Muslims as leading players and their harmonious relations, All India Radio cancelled its broadcast in 1984, despite fixing the date for broadcast. It shows how blockheaded bureaucracy is in matters of culture and literary representations.

Out of three plays, there is less of spontaneity in Dr. Harcharn Singh's play, despite covering maximum events of the tragedy.

There have been certain discrepancies in literary reflections of historic events of Komagata Maru tragedy of Indian freedom struggle, but generally most of the literary representations have truthfully reflected the inner spirit of Komagata Maru tragic events of 1914.

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